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Jason Weiss

An Interview with
EDGARDO COZARINSKY

Literary and film critic, writer of fiction and film scripts, director of features and documentaries, Edgardo Cozarinsky (Buenos Aires, 1939) keeps genres and discourses in constant flux, permeating each other in an ongoing dialogue of forms. Through the 1960s he frequented literary and film circles in Buenos Aires, especially the group around Victoria Ocampo's illustrious journal and publishing house Sur, which included Borges, Bioy Casares, and Silvina Ocampo. He published an early book on Henry James, and eventually made a first film in 1971, but his work as a filmmaker and as a writer mostly developed only after he left Argentina and settled in Paris in the mid-1970s.

His departure coincided with what was quickly becoming a wave of exiles from the Southern Cone, due to military dictatorships in Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay that lasted well into the next decade. Though many exiles headed for Mexico or Spain, a substantial number of intellectuals went elsewhere in Europe, especially Paris. Ever since the nineteenth century, writers and artists from Latin America (from Spanish America, above all) looked to Paris as a place of pilgrimage, an almost obligatory rite of passage in their cultural formation. Rubén Darío, Miguel Angel Asturias, Alejo Carpentier, César Vallejo, and Alfonso Reyes were but a few who spent significant years in Paris through the first half of the twentieth century; later, most of the writers in the so-called Boom spent time there, either early in their career (Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel García Márquez), or intermittently, or even for most of their adult life (Julio Cortázar, Severo Sarduy). Moreover, the French reception of such literature was well in advance of its interest among Anglo-Americans. Paris was the place where writers from throughout the continent were most likely to cross paths, and during much of the twentieth century it was somewhat considered the capital of Latin American literature. For more recent generations of writers, coming of age amid

the growth of vibrant democracies at home, the glow of Paris has dimmed, and yet even today the city is still teeming with Latin Americans.

Though he has long maintained a small apartment in the Montparnasse neighborhood of Paris, Cozarinsky only began returning for regular visits to Buenos Aires in the late 1980s, to the point where he gradually alternated about equally between the two cities and now probably stays more in his native land—amid various travels inevitably, whether for film projects or by invitation or simple curiosity. At the time of this interview---in New York, in April 1995---he was more actively engaged in his work making films. But following a serious illness and time in the hospital in 1999, he returned to writing with a vengeance, publishing over ten books (novels, stories, essays, chronicles) in the past decade alone.

Among his many films are: *La Guerre d'un seul homme* (1981; One Man's War), *Guerreros y cautivas* (1989; Warriors and Captive Women), *BoulevardS du crépuscule* (1992; Sunset BoulevardS), *Le Violon de Rothschild* (1995; Rothschild's Violin), *Tango-Désir* (2002; Tango Desire), *Ronda nocturna* (2005; Night Watch). His books include: *Vudú urbano* (1985; *Urban Voodoo*, 1990), *La novia de Odessa* (2001; *The Bride from Odessa*, 2004), *El rufián moldavo* (2004; *The Moldavian Pimp*, 2006), *Palacios plebeyos* (2006; Plebeian Palaces), *Man-iobras nocturnas* (2007; Night Manoe-uvres), *Milongas* (2007), *Lejos de dónde* (2009; Far from Where), *Blues* (2010).

Jason Weiss: *When you came to live in Paris in 1974, how well did you know the city? How did it meet your expectations?*

Edgardo Cozarinsky: I had been there four or five times before. The longest I had stayed was for a month, in '67 I think. When I first went as a tourist, I had

lots of prejudices about the city because I was aware of the long infatuation---Latin American and Argentine particularly---with Paris. Also, I had a certain idea in my imagination of Europe that came mostly through films. If you could speak in those terms, I was rather a London person than a Paris person. Because Paris seemed to be the city that was preferred by many Argentinians I didn't like too much, and at the same time I was always really attracted by English literature. Having followed Borges, I always had a sudden distaste for Paris literary life---for schools, groups, movements, everything that Paris seems to embody. London is supposed to be a city of individuals somehow, and not of groups. So, all this was in my head and I didn't expect to be very impressed by the city. But then I was impressed---slowly, by stages. It was not the French character or the literary life of Paris, which I continued to ignore completely; rather, it was the fact that it was a multi-cultural city, in a way I had never experienced before. I had not been aware of all the layers of Eastern Europeans, North Africans, Americans, South Americans, even the enormous Chinese and Vietnamese communities. I mean, there is this question that every country inherits its colonies. It caught my imagination very much. When I went in '74, I went thinking that I wanted to put some distance between me and Argentina, because it was very asphyxiating there, and I had an inkling that worse things were coming. And worse things did come . . . I had a film project for which I tried to get money in Germany, therefore I stayed in Paris because I had friends there. Slowly one decision led to another, I never decided I was going to stay in Paris. It was a series of minor decisions. I was very well advised by friends who told me, "In order to eventually get some money for your project here, it has to qualify as a French film. You not being a resident is a problem. Why don't you take a residence card for six months?" At that time, the problem of immigration was not so terrible as it is now. So, I just had to queue for half a day at the central police station to get my *carte de séjour* for six months, that's all. Then I renewed it. Slowly things got worse in Argentina, and a little money appeared, so I went postponing and postponing the return. But the major decision I only understood in retrospect, not at the moment it was made, because I think that somehow it was in the back of my mind and I didn't want to admit it.

In Paris, at the beginning, did you mostly seek out Latin Americans and Argentines?

It was a mixture. When I arrived, I stayed at the house of Argentine friends for a month, and for the first six months I didn't rent a place of my own. That also goes to show that I was not sure. I had Argentine friends, people I had known for years, but at the same time I acquired some of my best French friends in the first months.

When did you first return for a visit to Buenos Aires? Did that shed a different light on your being in Paris?

In 1974, when I left, I went back for fifteen days before the end of the year. Because I had made up my mind to stay for a few months. So, I went back just to leave some papers signed for my mother, and to pick up some books and clothes. Then, I didn't go back until '85. I returned for three weeks, and I didn't go back again until '87. And then I started going regularly. Now it's a pattern more or less, I go there for Christmas and New Year, three weeks if I can.

Had you remained in contact all through that time with people in Argentina?

All the time. I corresponded, and also there were Argentine friends who visited Paris, they always brought me news. When video became more common . . . there was particularly one friend of mine, perhaps my best friend in Argentina, who made a yearly visit to Paris, he started bringing cassettes labeled "Chronicles of Everyday Horror" 1983, 1984, 1985, etcetera. They were mostly composed of television advertisements, fragments of talk shows or telenovelas, a kind of miscellany of things he found. And, of course, they were particularly terrible. But I remember the labels. The idea was, he said, "You know how much I enjoy seeing you in Paris, but there is something I cannot stand: very late in the evening sometimes, after having had too many drinks, you get into a fit of nostalgia. Now, each time you feel that nostalgia is coming, you just give this a look."

Do you think nostalgia plays a role for you culturally as an Argentine abroad?

I don't think I would be able to live in Argentina, first of all because I cannot earn my living doing what I like to do and I can earn my living doing things I like to do in Paris. That's basic. But on the other hand, if I knew I couldn't go back to Argentina even on a visit, I think I would be very, very desperate. Because my

visits there now, through the years, have become a kind of vampyric nourishment. I go there to suck the blood of my past. It's a kind of nostalgia trip: I go there and I recover the person I was many years ago. It's double, because on the one hand, when I say I recover the person I was years ago, it's just that the city's another city, so it's not a question of visiting places. But there are ways of speaking that haven't changed, and there are little things, there are always the equivalent of Proust's madeleines everywhere. There is not a big place that centers it all, it's as if the city and the people were *saupoudré*---sprinkled---with a kind of capacity for Proustian evocation. It's something that nourishes me very much, because on the other hand I meet many people I didn't know before, younger people who did not know me. In Argentina, I am there on a visit, so there is always somebody who happens to appear, introduced by friends, and sooner or later he or she starts asking, "So, what do you do when you're in Buenos Aires, and how do you see this and that?" And that forces me into a different look at the city. When they speak, I realize they look at things in a much different way. So, I get both things: I get my own sentimental journey and I get other people's completely different, fresh look at things. That's a correction to nostalgia, and at the same time both things are very nourishing. It's like one spoonful of the past and one spoonful of the present, of another world.

For your generation in Argentina, as you've remarked, it was very natural to think of Paris. Is that still the case?

No, that doesn't exist at all. Looking toward Europe has always been a kind of cultural habit, and it belongs to a period when culture in itself was a value that all the middle classes aspired to acquire. That has completely disappeared in the last ten years, especially in the last five. Now there has been the equivalent of yuppies, which really altered a certain feeling of society. Let's say that if people before dreamed of Paris, now they do not dream; they think of Miami. Because there is a whole strata of the middle class who can't speak any other language than Spanish, who go on shopping sprees to Miami. There are even hotels that do special weekend packages for Argentine tourists. The people who can afford it, and they are not few, are the expression of something very typical of this moment. People who would go visit Europe are people who have some other kind of interest, but you do not see their presence in society, it's more of an individual thing.

Do you see younger generations of literary or arts-related people coming much to Paris?

No. If they're interested in the arts, they go to New York. If they're interested in shopping, they go to Miami. They occasionally go to Paris or Europe in general, but it's more like a museum visit.

What do you feel is the place that you've made for yourself in Paris and among the French? Do you feel that you work well as part of, or not part of, French society?

The only way I can describe it is saying I can work inside French society as somebody who is an outsider. And that's the official role. The French have many classifications, and in this classification there is a pigeonhole: the foreign artist in Paris. So, that's a role whether you like it or not, because there is no assimila-tion possible. It has become a kind of immigration, but the idea of France is not an idea that can accept immigration. It's not like the United States or Argentina, or any other country made up of immigrants. In France, the idea of immigration is a kind of human rights gesture, they accommodate people who do not have a place to be. That's completely formal, it's a kind of political-historical concept. But what makes French society is something that excludes foreigners completely. It's like trying to speak without an accent---I could never speak without an accent, and why should I take the trouble to lose my accent when any Frenchman, just by the fact of having been born in France, doesn't have a foreign accent? So, I'd rather be accepted for something else, but that means also that I have to accept the fact that my role---the role in which I'm accepted and in which I work comfortably inside French society---is that of the foreign artist, which is a very privileged thing. For the French, it's not a question of generosity; it's a question of vanity. At heart, they say, "Where else would a writer, a filmmaker, an artist, go if not to Paris because we are still the center of the world?" Therefore, they are more disposed to accept the presence of foreigners in the cultural field.

How does this position affect your sense of the language you write in?

I write in Spanish and I write in English sometimes, because I feel that English,

which I speak with a certain difficulty, is the language in which my imagination unloosens more easily. I have later retranslated into Spanish and through work it goes further [*in the "postcards" section that made up most of his book* Vudú urbano, *each text several pages long, he wrote them all first in English and then translated them into Spanish---JW*]. But the first step, it's as if by putting some words on paper I was joining a club or entering a room where some of my favorite writers exist. For reasons of work I have to write in French very often, but primarily they are not literary texts. The narration for my film *BoulevardS du crépuscule* (1992) may be the most "literary" thing that I wrote in French. My French is also far from perfect, but it's a different situation. For me, French is a language of order; therefore, whenever I have to write a text in French, maybe I read two or three pages of Michel Leiris---it's the classical French tradition in the twentieth century---after that, something starts to flow in that direction. But when I write in English, I don't read anything. I just start writing in English, and it may be full of mistakes but I start finding words. For me, English is a language of vocabulary, of a richness of different words, of related concepts, while French is a language of syntax.

How has the audience response been to your films? Were they received better in France?

In the last few years, they have been better received in France, but at the beginning they were mostly well received outside France, mostly in England. There was at least a critical acceptance in England that I was very glad with, because there was nothing like that in France. You know, you may do the same thing, ten years ago and now, but after ten years people start realizing there is a continuity. In the eyes of people it is very important, it's a kind of commodity. There are things that if it's in one or two works, it's a defect; if they see it more or less regularly through ten, twelve years, it becomes a style.

On exile. What constitutes exile for you? Did you feel yourself an exile immediately, or was it a certain experience of exile that changed for you?

No, I didn't feel an exile really. It's like Sartre's old idea in *Réflexion sur la question juive*, saying you're a Jew when other people see you as a Jew. I became an exile through my reflection in other people's eyes. But I never thought about

it. What I realized, for instance, it's very curious, I started being very interested in most historical and cultural aspects related to the Jewish diaspora, during my first years in Europe. And I had been brought up completely outside religion, completely outside tradition. It wasn't a question on the part of my parents of denying, there was no denial. It's just that they were not religious and they didn't feel attached to any Jewish tradition.

Is there any particular term you feel more comfortable with, to describe your status---exile, foreigner, displaced person?

The only thing I can say is something I heard Joseph Losey say once: I feel at home in not being at home.

Does that have any resonance for you being Jewish, even nonreligious?

It all fits nicely into a kind of displaced person identity. But I don't think it is something I would arrive at myself, perhaps other people can see it.

Would you say there is an artistic style of exile? Is there a particular way that one conditions the other?

If you're going to work in something that involves a certain distance, no matter how close to reality you may think you are, exile naturally provides much of that distance. But I don't know if that makes it easier. I would say, perhaps by providing that distance, you don't have to work to create it. You may also feel more inclined or full of energy to do something because you are far from a certain reality. I don't see it in myself, but it's a personal response.

You've said that in writing what you call the "postcards" that are the brief story-essays in Urban Voodoo *(1985), it rather freed you in*

your writing, that it was a sort of response to being in exile at that point. That is the only book you've published since living in Paris. What is the nature of the unfinished writing you've done since?

Three chapters of a novel. There are several short texts that are very uncertain in their character, because they are not essays, they don't seem to have a particular subject, they jump freely from one thing to another. But I go on writing. At one moment or another, one of them is going to get finished or to evolve, to develop a certain form, and that form will allow me to finish it.

Is there a reason why film has become your main professional activity, over writing?

Because I enjoy enormously working in it. Writing and making films is a little bit like trying to reconcile two halves of a schizophrenic personality. One half would be the warrior, and the other would be the monk. In films, you have to go out and fight, you have to convince people that your project is interesting; all the time you have to be surrounded by people, have them do what you want to be done, and listen to them, but at the same time have them do what you want. When you are writing, you're like a monk, you are alone---alone with God perhaps, but you are alone with the paper and the pencil, and you have to look inside. So, I need both. Now, for the last years, the warrior has taken the main role, let's say, but I wouldn't be able to do one thing without the other.

Has your sense of literature or cinema developed much in the twenty years you've been in Paris? Has it been affected much by French currents?

Not by French currents, but by the possibility of working. My French residence has been interesting for me, in very objective professional terms. And also, the important fact that I have been obliged, by the fact of being in France, to define better certain things that I do, to give them a clearer shape than perhaps I would have needed if I had lived in Argentina or elsewhere. In that sense, there's a self-consciousness in France that may be very deadening in another aspect, but up to a point it's very helpful. It's a question of putting some order, and at the same time knowing that total order is death. So, you have to keep the magma somewhere, in order to nourish the order.